

6. The Political Machine

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Unlike the middle class and urban capitalists, who are concerned about taxes, efficiency in governance, and development of the city economy, the urban poor, who are the major voters in the city, tend to be more interested in the direct benefits from the city government. To accomplish this, the political machine is used to systemize the flow of benefits. As discussed in the previous chapter, the state resources are under the mayor's discretion. The political machine enables the mayor to gain the support and loyalty of the poor using the state resources under his control. This chapter focuses on operation of the political machine under Jesse M. Robredo.¹

Robredo has organized the urban poor residents by social sectors. This helps him to maintain effective unitary control and distribution over resources. He has also set up offices in the city government to deal with these sector organizations, and these offices have been used to incorporate the organizations into the city government. This incorporation is a fundamental piece of Robredo's political machine. The mayor spends a lot of time and energy in organizing. Everyday after office hours he visits the barangays in the city to keep up his contacts with grassroots leaders and residents. Having strong political machine is another means for holding onto power, along with the mayor's award-winning governance of the city which was examined in the previous chapter.

Robredo and His Political Machine

Gaining the support and loyalty from the urban poor in Naga City is done through the work of grassroots leaders, who are called *liders* in Tagalog.² These grassroots leaders are commonly seen at barangay or lower precinct levels. They are active in electoral campaigning, especially vote gathering, and work as brokers between the residents and the city government for distributing government resources. Robredo was a newcomer to Naga politics in his first election and totally relied on Villafuerte's (actually del Castillo's) network of grassroots leaders in each precinct. However, his falling out with Villafuerte forced Robredo to establish his own network of supporters.

Robredo set up his network among grassroots leaders and residents more systematically than had his predecessors, Felipe, Sibulo, and Villafuerte (through del Castillo). Although these predecessors had networks of supporters, these were not consistently maintained through formal organizations. Robredo established formal long-term organizations made up of these grassroots leaders and urban poor residents. He then kept up the management of these organizations through specific offices he set up in the city government.

As presented in Chapter 2, a political machine can gain four advantages by organizing voters. It can gain (1) effective control over resources, (2) effective control over grassroots leaders, (3) smooth election campaigning, and (4) a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis national figures. Robredo's political machine likewise garnered four such advantages. These were observed in the following ways.

Firstly, Robredo's grassroots organizations gave him unitary and effective control over resources. It is troublesome to respond to each resident's request one by one. When Robredo sat in mayoral office in 1988, residents would rush into the office bringing all sorts of requests that occupied most of the working hours of the mayor and his staff. To cope with the situation, the city government started funneling requests through grassroots organizations by using grassroots leaders as representatives or brokers. At the same time, the city government set up related offices to deal with the grassroots organizations in order to handle the resident requests coming through these organizations, which in effect meant the systematization of benefit distribution. Such use of organizations among the urban poor systematized and clarified the routes of benefit distribution, and access to state resources could be monopolized through these organizations as such access could be secured only by joining the organizations.

Secondly, in terms of controlling grassroots leaders and managing election campaigns, Robredo could maintain continuous supervision of grassroots leaders and mobilize them during election periods. For the power holder, organizations make it easy to recognize who are members of his side, and to check on the loyalty of grassroots leaders every now and then. Robredo reviews and partially changes the officers of his organizations at least a year before elections. The reviews are aimed at excluding grassroots leaders of questionable loyalty and to place newly emerging grassroots leaders in important positions. Through such reviews and replacements, the organizations can be readily activated during electoral campaigns. They can also be used to gather information regarding socioeconomic conditions and the reactions of residents about city government services. This way Robredo can ascertain the problems of residents and their views of his administration.

Regarding the last advantage, strengthening the bargaining power of local politicians vis-à-vis national politicians, the president and congressional legislators provide benefits like pork barrel funds to Robredo's programs because they seek his cooperation during elections. As already mentioned, national political figures regard the support of strong local political machines run by local figures as indispensable in winning elections. Since there are no cohesive political parties in the Philippines, it is networks of local political machines that form political parties during elections. Such networks can rearrange themselves from election to election, and this rearranging causes the reorganization and realignment of political parties that is readily seen in Philippine politics. In such political circumstances, Robredo has been able to build strong ties with national government because of his strong political machine.

The notable feature in the process of organizing the political machine in Naga City is that the city government initiated the organizing. The example of the machine in Naga City supports the validity of the state-centered approach.

Lingkod Barangay Office and Sector-Based Organizations

Robredo's first organization in Naga City was one for women, the *Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga Federation* (Power of Women of Naga Federation). Robredo's wife was the initiator of the organization. It was established in 1989 when the rift with Villafuerte took place. The initial membership was around 5,000, but it reached 15,000 by 1997.

The method for organizing the *Lakas ng Kababaihan* has been the model for other organizations. The organizing started from the center. Robredo made his wife the central figure, and selected grassroots leaders in each barangay

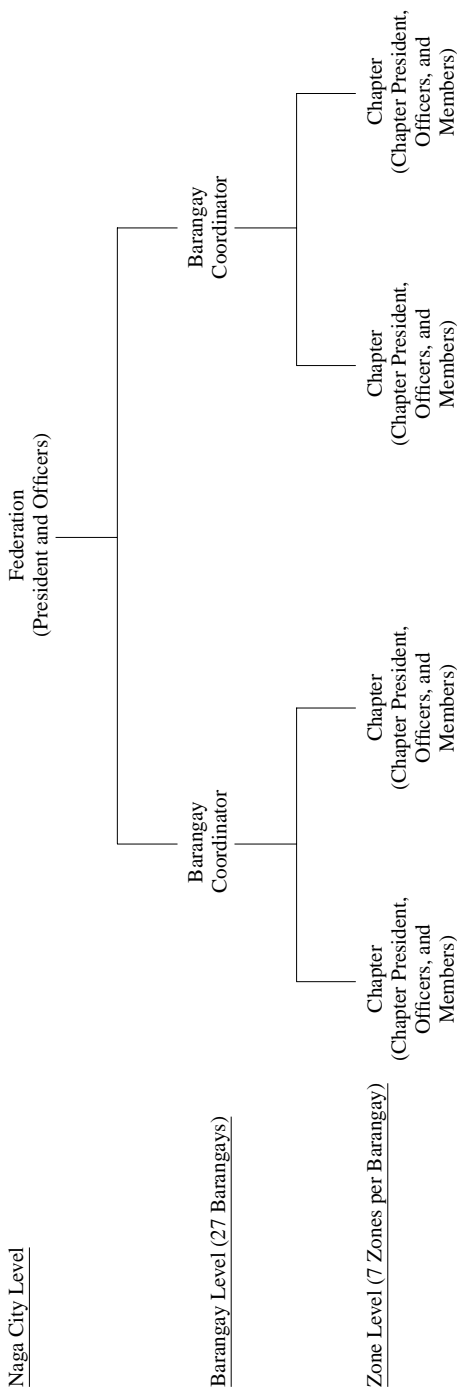
who became the core of the organization. These barangay-level leaders chose lower-level grassroots leaders who in turn recruited members. Each barangay in Naga City is divided into seven zones. The Lakas ng Kababaihan set up its chapters in all of these zones. A chapter is the smallest unit of the organization, and each chapter has a president. There is coordinator in each barangay who coordinates the chapters in the barangay. All the chapters are integrated at the city level as the federation. The federation has a president, vice president, and other officers (Figure 6-1).

The Lakas ng Kababaihan as a group does not have any particular activities. Aside from participating as a whole in several city events, there are so-called livelihood projects like making handicrafts to augment member income. But the main function of the organization is to provide access to the city government for obtaining services when a member encounters problems like the death or illness of a family member. If a member runs into a problem, the chapter president or barangay coordinator brings the member to the appropriate city government office and arranges for the release of the necessary services, which are mostly financial assistance for medicine or funerals. Members of the Lakas ng Kababaihan have identification cards, and they can avail themselves to free medical consultation at the City Hospital without referral from the city government if they show their ID.³ Another significant function of the federation is to mobilize members for election campaigns. Members of the Lakas ng Kababaihan prepare campaign meetings in each zone and leaders of the organization accompany Robredo and his candidates during their campaign visits. And most importantly, they vote for Robredo's slate.

Along with the Lakas ng Kababaihan, the Barangay People's Organization is another mainstay in Robredo's political machine. Its origin goes back to 1988 when it began as a group of Robredo's poll watchers. Under the election code, each candidate has the right to place a poll watcher in each precinct to check on the voting and counting process.⁴ In addition to a formal watcher, candidates usually place additional watchers in each precinct, and they play an important role in campaigning, such as gathering information about opponents' activities and distributing sample ballots on which the names of candidates are printed. Robredo placed an average of ten watchers per precinct in the 1992 election. Therefore, the membership of Barangay People's Organization was estimated at around 3,200, since there were 321 election precincts in Naga City at the time of the 1992 elections. Members of this organization are regarded as the most loyal of Robredo's grassroots leaders in the city. Some members of the organization also belong to the Lakas ng Kababaihan.

The Barangay People's Organization expanded its membership by ending its exclusiveness. It was reorganized into the Barangay People's Foundation.

Fig. 6-1. Organizational Structure of the Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga Federation



Source: Lingkod Barangay Office, Naga City Government.

The reorganization was carried out to enable members who had worked for Robredo in past elections to manage profitable projects. With the reorganization, chapters were created at the barangay level, with twenty-five officers each. The Barangay People's Foundation at city level is composed of these chapters and also has a set of city-level officers (Figure 6-2). Despite such changes, the core members of the Barangay People's Foundation who used to be active members of the old Barangay People's Organization still form groups of poll watchers during elections. Members of the Barangay People's Foundation can make use of the same city government services as members of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*.

While the above two organizations are the mainstays of Robredo's political machine, he also established other sector-based organizations which reached a total of twelve by 1997 (Table 6-1). He set up the *Lingkod Barangay Office* within the city government for taking care of and managing these organizations. It was officially established in 1992, but even before there was a group in the mayor's office responsible for the sector-based organizations. The *Lingkod Barangay Office* was created because this original group was separated from the mayor's office and given an independent office as organizing activities expanded.

TABLE 6-1
SECTOR-BASED ORGANIZATIONS DIRECTED BY THE CITY GOVERNMENT AS OF 1997

Organizations	Establishment	Membership
Lakas ng Kababaihan ng Naga Federation	1989	15,000
Lakas ng Kababaihan Cooperative	n.a.	5,000
Senior Citizens League	1990	10,000
Naga City Youth Federation	1993	3,000
Rabuz Naga ^a	1994	n.a.
Barangay People's Foundation ^b	1988 (1995)	6,000
Padyak Operators & Drivers Association ^c	1993	2,000
Trimobile Operators & Drivers Association ^d	1994	4,500
Karetela Association ^e	1993	150
Market Stallholders Federation ^f	1960s	6,000
Metro Naga Venders Federation	1995	1,000
Vegetable Planters Federation	1993	4,000

Source: See Figure 6-1.

^a *Rabuz* means zone. It is the beautification organization based on the barangays.

^b Originally the Barangay People's Organization. It was reorganized in 1995.

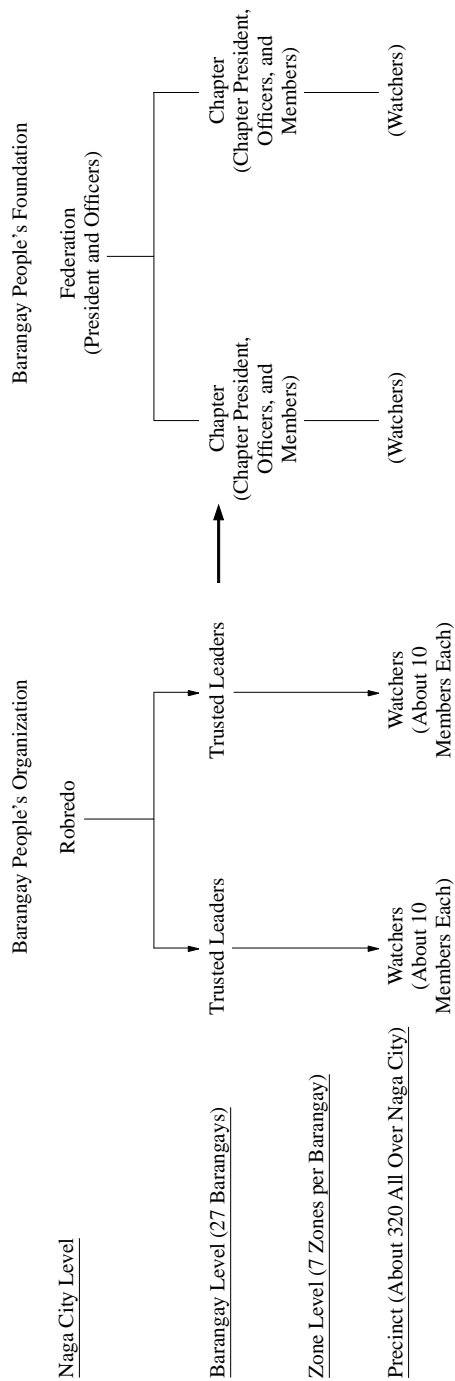
^c A *padyak* is a means of transportation made from a bicycle with a sidecar.

^d A trimobile is also a means of transportation made from a motorcycle with a sidecar.

^e A *karetela* is a carriage.

^f It is composed of twenty-seven organizations which deal in different goods.

Fig. 6-2. Organizational Structure of the Barangay People's Foundation (Barangay People's Organization)



Source: See Figure 6-1.

The functions of the office can be divided into two categories: functions during non-election periods and functions at the times of elections.

Its non-election period functions are (1) setting up sectoral organizations and supporting their daily activities, and (2) receiving requests from the members of these organizations and providing them with the necessary services or referring them to the offices in charge.

Regarding the first function, almost all the organizations in Table 6-1 were set up by the Lingkod Barangay Office, or by the original group in the mayor's office. They were set up through coordination between the Lingkod Barangay Office and grassroots leaders in each barangay. Like the formation of the *Lakas ng Kababaihan*, the organizing process is top down. The Lingkod Barangay Office selects grassroots-level leaders with the assistance of barangay-level leaders. The office arranges meetings as well as selects the officers of the organizations. It also performs necessary routine functions for the organizations like accounting, printing handbills, setting schedules for meetings, and holding events where the organizations participate.

As for the second function during non-election periods, the Lingkod Barangay Offices handles problems it is capable of dealing with, and those beyond its capabilities are referred to other responsible offices and departments of the city government. Most requests from residents concern so-called indigent services such as free medicine, free medical consultation, and financial assistance for funerals. The City Mayor's Office covers the expenses in some cases, while the City Hospital or the City Social Welfare and Development Office sometimes take care of expenses. Other requests include indivisible interests, such as streetlights, drainage, water pumps, and paving roads which the Lingkod Barangay Office passes on to the city government. These requests are taken up in the city's infrastructure projects.

The functions of the Lingkod Barangay Office during elections include: (1) mobilizing the sectoral organizations for vote gathering; (2) gathering information concerning the situation of grassroots leaders, especially concerning matters affecting their loyalty to Robredo and preventing their defection to opposition camps; (3) recruiting new grassroots leaders and removing disloyal ones; (4) setting the campaign schedule for "sorties" (meetings) and "house to house" (visiting each voter) by coordinating with grassroots leaders; and (5) getting feedback from members of the sectoral organizations regarding the services and management of the city government.

Among these functions, (1), (2), and (3) are core functions of the Lingkod Barangay Office for mobilizing, maintaining, and strengthening the sectoral organizations. The fourth function indicates that the office plays the role of a *de facto* campaign management office at the grassroots level. Robredo regu-

larly conducts precinct surveys to learn about resident perceptions of candidates. Based on the surveys, he decides which areas should receive intensive campaigning, and the Lingkod Barangay Office is charged with that task. The fifth function is related to strengthening the government services. Even during non-election time, the office carries out this function, but it is intensified during election time. Resident requests greatly increase as elections draw near. The city government intensifies its services to reflect favorably on Robredo's leadership. The city government cannot initiate these services on its own, but it can intensify its response to requests because the amount of requests from residents is so huge. Responding to each request is all the city government can do at these times. The huge increase in resident requests occurs because the total quantity of services offered by all campaigning politicians—both incumbent and opposition—increases during the election period. Voters know that they can maximize their bargaining power during elections. Most of the requests are related to material benefits like installing water pumps to overcome water shortages or providing goods for community festivals.⁵ The Lingkod Barangay Office deals with the high volume of requests through frequent communications with other city government offices as well as with the headquarters of candidates.

Urban Poor Affairs Office and Urban Poor Organizations

Unlike the Lingkod Barangay Office which is directly involved in political activities, the Urban Poor Affairs Office (UPAO) of the city government is not involved in political affairs. The UPAO's task is to handle problems peculiar to the urban poor in the city. Its main task especially is to help the urban poor acquire land titles. The urban poor organizations that the UPAO deals with are products of collaborations between the city government, a nongovernmental organization, and people's organizations rather than those organized solely on the initiative of the city government. In this sense, these urban poor organizations are also different from the sector-based organizations of the Lingkod Barangay Office which are involved solely with city government initiatives and distribute resources and benefits directly to their members. However it should be noted that the city government's projects for the urban poor work indirectly to distribute benefits and consequently gain support for the mayor. And these projects are carried out systematically and efficiently through the collaboration of the UPAO and the urban poor organizations.

The problems of the urban poor in Naga City were already apparent even during Robredo's predecessor's administration. The poor state of basic living conditions, like the lack of drinking water, was considered to be the most

serious problem. To tackle such problems, a private group based on the Catholic Church called the Community Organization of the Philippines Enterprise Foundation (COPE Foundation) started organizing the urban poor and helping them to improve their living conditions. The COPE Foundation started its activities in Naga City by conducting seminars just after the 1986 EDSA Revolution. Initially they were successful in establishing urban poor organizations in at least five barangays. In 1987 these grassroots-level organizations formed a city-level federation, the Naga City Urban Poor Federation (NCUPF). But the city government under Mayor del Castillo took a confrontational stance against these urban poor groups, fearing that they might be communist-led organizations. Confronted by the city government's antagonism, urban poor organizations had difficulty functioning and expanding. However, when Robredo came to power in 1988, the situation changed radically. His administration formed friendly relations with the COPE Foundation and the NCUPF. With the changed circumstances, the number of member organizations of the NCUPF increased dramatically reaching more than seventy by 1998.⁶

Robredo created the UPAO in 1989 as a special office for urban poor affairs, and he started the *Kaantabay sa Kauswagan* (Partners in Development Program), which mainly helps the poor to acquire land titles. Initially the city government did not give priority to land title acquisition, but it gradually noticed that the land title problem had to be addressed before other matters. As of 1997 only 30 per cent of the residents in Naga City held land titles.⁷

By 1997 the UPAO was able to accomplish (1) the distribution of a total of 49.6 hectares of private and government-owned land to a total of 4,668 urban poor families, (2) the upgrading of twenty-seven urban poor communities housing around 2,700 families, (3) the securing of a total of 25.4 hectares for future housing projects of the city government, and (4) the organizational strengthening of the urban poor sector through the formation of a total of seventy-three urban poor organizations (Naga 1997a).

To acquire land titles, the UPAO uses the following methods. (1) Direct purchase. The city government buys up land where the urban poor reside. The occupants then amortize the cost of their individual home lots to the city government. (2) Land swapping. The exchange of property occupied by the urban poor with other unoccupied property of roughly equal value. The occupants amortize the cost to the city government. (3) Land sharing. Forming mutually acceptable arrangements for a single property that allows both private landowner and urban poor occupants. (4) Community mortgaging. The wholesale purchase of private properties using the community mortgage financing program of the National Home Mortgage Finance Corporation (NHMFC). (5) The establishment of relocation/resettlement sites (Naga UPAO

n.d.). In addition the UPAO prepared some supporting programs such as livelihood projects and the establishment of trust funds.

Robredo and his staff at the UPAO have exhibited distinguished management capability in providing needed services to the urban poor within the limited resources they have. Moreover, Robredo has been concerned with how to sustain the program, and for this reason, the city government has not merely doled out funds to the urban poor. This has meant that the urban poor have had to carry the costs in the end. But even with this burden, there is no doubt that they appreciated the chances to improve their conditions through the city government's program, especially considering that there is no other way to acquire land titles. This has motivated the urban poor to support Robredo in the elections. The NCUPF's charter prohibits its participation in partisan activities. Therefore it does not officially endorse any candidates in the elections.⁸ However, the improvements brought about by the city government motivate members of the NCUPF to join the sector-based organizations of the Lingkod Barangay Office like the *Lakas ng Kababaihan* and the *Barangay People's Foundation*. These people then worked for Robredo's campaigns as members of such sector-based organizations.

Supporting Offices

While the Lingkod Barangay Office and sector-based organizations, and likewise the UPAO and member organizations of the NCUPF, are the main elements of Robredo's machine, there are two other offices which play supporting roles. They are DOLECOM and the City Social Welfare and Development Office.

DOLECOM is an acronym for the Development Office for Livelihood, Employment, Cooperatives and Manpower. As indicated in its name, DOLECOM provides four services, namely, loans for small-scale business (livelihood), brokering job opportunities (employment), support for cooperatives (cooperatives), and vocational training (manpower). These programs started in 1988 and the City Planning and Development Office undertook them at first. As the scale of the programs expanded, the new office of DOLECOM was created in 1992. Its funds come basically from the city government budget, but pork barrel money from senators and congressmen, which is not small in amount, is also channeled to the office.

The livelihood program is the most politically important service among the four. Loans are available for any entity, whether they are individuals, organizations, or cooperatives, but most of the clients are individuals. They are mostly small-scale businessmen, like sari-sari store owners, watch repairers,

vegetable vendors, and small eatery owners. Collateral is not required for loans. Qualifications for applications are (1) that the business should be operated in Naga City, (2) that the amount of a loan should not exceed the maximum limit, and (3) that feasibility should be verified by DOLECOM. The amount for a first-time loan ranges from 1,000 to 3,000 pesos. The range for additional loans is 3,000 to 5,000 pesos, with a total maximum of 15,000 pesos allowed. The interest rate is 1 per cent per month which is quite low as private financial institutions charge almost 30 per cent per year.

DOLECOM maintains close communication with barangay officials to advertise its programs. Hence, there are a lot of so-called “walk-in” clients who received the information through these leaders. The Lingkod Barangay Office and the City Mayor’s Office also refer some clients. Most of these are members of sector-based organizations or the organizations themselves. The Lakas ng Kababaihan is one of the noteworthy beneficiaries of loans from DOLECOM since it has its own cooperative and handicraft making activities. Table 6-2 shows the figures for DOLECOM’s livelihood project. The amount of loans has increased almost every year. In 1990 only 108,000 pesos were lent, but the amount reached 3,526,125 pesos by 1996 which was thirty times more than the initial amount. The number of the beneficiaries has also correspondingly increased from 127 in 1990 to 2,843 in 1996 which was twenty times bigger.

Many Naga City residents need the livelihood program for making a living, and it is one of the city government’s significant services. At the same time, the program also plays a political role. This was clearly seen in the 1992 elections. The Villafuerte group established an organization called Bunyog Banuaan (Unity of Community) which provided loans to grassroots leaders in

TABLE 6-2
SELF-EMPLOYMENT FACILITATION (LIVELIHOOD FINANCING) THROUGH DOLECOM,
NAGA CITY GOVERNMENT

	Amount Loaned		Amount Collected		Efficiency (%)	Beneficiaries
	Peso	Change (%)	Peso	Change (%)		
1990	108,000.00					127
1991	638,000.00	490.7	44,253.81		6.9	1,009
1992	531,900.00	-16.6	79,725.00	80.2	15.0	1,063
1993	2,036,625.00	282.9	676,522.44	748.6	33.2	1,681
1994	3,753,202.00	84.3	1,394,613.00	106.1	37.2	2,261
1995	4,376,500.00	16.6	2,257,465.60	61.9	51.6	2,824
1996	3,526,125.00	-19.4	2,499,660.00	10.7	70.9	2,843

Source: Naga DOLECOM (1997).

the city for campaign purposes. To counter this operation, Robredo provided small-scale loans to his important grassroots leaders to keep them in his camp.

The other supporting office, the City Social Welfare and Development Office, also provides a number of services to the residents. This office used to be the field office for the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the national government. It was transferred to the Naga City government in 1992 in accordance with the decentralization program implemented under the Local Government Code of 1991. The office operates four services: (1) a livelihood service, (2) a family welfare service, (3) an emergency assistance service, and (4) an indigent service.

Regarding the livelihood service, it provides loans to small-scale businesses as DOLECOM does. It mobilizes national as well as city funds for its service. However, the amount that the office manages is not as large as that of DOLECOM since the number of its staff is limited. The family welfare service is the main service provided by this office. It handles welfare for street children, marriage counseling, and other family welfare matters. The emergency assistance service is for rehabilitation in times of disaster. The Bicol Region is called a typhoon corridor. The damage caused by heavy rains is a regular problem for Naga City. Flood is an especially serious problem. The office provides emergency supplies and financial support to affected residents.

The fourth service, the one for indigence, is politically the most important of the office's services. It provides financial support to the urban poor to cover expenses for illness, injuries, fire, and death. The office deals with an average of seventy cases per month, and the total amount of monthly expenditures for this service reaches around 10,000 pesos. The amount per case is not very high, but the poor who do not have available funds appreciate this service. Most of the clients are referred by the Lingkod Barangay Office, the City Mayor's Office, or city councilors. Even before the Social Welfare and Development Office was transferred from the national to the city government, there were many referrals from the city government to the office. But this increased after the transfer. In this way the Social Welfare and Development Office, like DOLECOM, is involved in resource distribution to city residents, particularly to the poor.

Compared with indivisible benefits like infrastructure development, divisible benefits given to the urban poor are not so costly in amount. For example, the land acquisition program for the poor and the loans from DOLECOM operate on the condition that the beneficiaries pay later or return the funds in the end. Even the programs of the City Social Welfare and Development Office take up a rather small portion of city government expenditures. A major

reason for the rather low cost is the city government's "no dole-out" policy which it says strengthens the self-reliance of the citizens. Minimizing dole-outs helps to maximize the utilization of limited resources. Here lies an important reason for Robredo's effective political machine. It has maintained a balance of sound finances in city government and the continuation of machine management. Usually a political machine leads to financial breakdown because of the huge amount of financial resources needed to maintain its power and influence, and the power holder ends up in a very unstable situation once the crisis becomes unmanageable.⁹ However, on this point, Robredo has demonstrated his uniquely capable administrative abilities. He has been able to manage two seemingly contradictory tasks: keeping the city government on a sound financial footing and maintaining his strong political machine.

This chapter discussed Robredo's political strategy for gaining the support of the urban poor. It is the political machine composed of the city government and people's organizations. The existence of this strong political machine is another side of the Robredo administration, along with his performance in city governance. The next chapter focuses on the leaders of this machine and describes the mechanism of power.

Notes

- 1 To avoid complications and to protect the privacy of informants, the names of interviewees whom the author relies on are not mentioned here. The information in this chapter comes from the author's interviews as well as from his own observations.
- 2 The word *lider* originates from the English word "leader." It specifically indicates a grassroots-level political leader. See Hollnsteiner (1963, p. 41).
- 3 It does not mean that non-ID card holders cannot make use of the medical support. But ID card holders can skip some procedures for accessing the services.
- 4 Omnibus Election Code of the Philippines (Batas Pambansa Blig. 881 as modified/amended by R.A. 6636, 6646, 6734, 6766, 6679, 7166, 7941, 8189, and the 1987 Constitution), Sec. 178–180.
- 5 During this author's observation of the 1998 elections, he noted that the city government stockpiled a lot of water pumps in preparation for the increase in request. The campaign offices of all candidates accept visitors who request funds for medicine and make solicitations for balls, trophies, T-shirts, and the like for sports festivals. The staff of the Lingkod Barangay Office is mobilized to respond these requests. The situation is the same in the opposition offices, but they lack the ability to utilize the resources of the city government.
- 6 Angeles (1997) and Alejo (n.d.) are informative regarding the history of the urban poor movement in Naga City.

- 7 Data from the Urban Poor Affairs Office of Naga City.
- 8 However, the NCUPF tries to realize its goals by pressuring candidates in the elections. It uses candidate forums during the campaign period to present its urban poor agenda for development and asks candidates to agree to the agenda. See Angeles (1997, p. 101).
- 9 This has been widely observed in American urban politics. As one of several causes for fiscal crisis in American cities, Shefter (1992, p. 10) points out, “another circumstance in which municipal expenditures increase more rapidly than revenues is when local officials, in an effort to mobilize political support (or to forestall opposition) among an ethnic or racial minority whose members previously had received less than their proportionate share of public benefits, increase the flow of benefits to the group in question.”